SPECIAL 28-PAGE ISSUE: A COLD WAR ICON IS REBORN
The AMC Museum Hangar Digest is published quarterly and is dedicated to the preservation of our airlift and tanker heritage. All articles, unless otherwise noted, are written by the editor. Viewpoints in this publication are those of the contributing authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of The AMC Museum Foundation or of the Museum’s staff.

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Photos are by Jeff Brown, unless otherwise noted.

Cover: Standing in the shadow of the AMCM’s still unfinished KB-50J, Director John Taylor hosted the May 15, 2021, rededication of the Museum’s Superfortress. In the crowd were members of the TAC Tankers Association and their families, who had come from across the country that weekend to hold the group’s final reunion in Delaware. The get-together had been delayed from 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions.

Air Mobility Command Museum
Mission Statement

The mission of the Air Mobility Command Museum is twofold:

- To present the history and development of military airlift and tanker operations.
- In a goal closely aligned with the first, to portray the rich history of Dover Air Force Base and its predecessor, Dover Army Airfield.

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What is the Air Mobility Command Museum?

Located in Hangar 1301 on Dover Air Force Base, Kent County, Delaware, the AMC Museum is part of the National Museum of the United States Air Force’s field museum system.

One of the reasons your AMC Museum continues to provide a great educational experience is that we stick very closely to our reason for being.

So exactly what is our mission? Broken down by numbers our mission is 70 percent airlift and air-refueling, 20 percent Dover AFB history and 10 percent Air Force general history. Our aircraft and artifact collection sticks very closely to that breakdown. But we work hard to be much more than numbers. We tell the stories of the people who have served in our nation’s Air Force, and we offer the only opportunity for many visitors to see the actual aircraft and meet the people who have served our country.

Hangar 1301 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. Although located on Dover AFB proper, entrance to the Museum is made from Delaware Route 9, south of the base. Admission to and parking at the Museum is free and military identification is not required. The Air Mobility Command Museum is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday. It is closed on Mondays, Tuesdays, and all federal holidays except Veterans Day. For more information, call 302-677-5938 or 302-677-5991.

We like to say we are a window to your Air Force. Let us know how we can continue to improve our outreach and family-friendly experience.
KB-50J dedication
TAC Tanker vets welcome a historic aircraft

Smiles, salutes, and the rekindling of old friendships were evident May 15, 2021, as the Tactical Air Command (TAC) Tanker Association held part of their 22nd reunion at the Air Mobility Command Museum at Dover Air Force Base, Del.

The group had assembled to witness the unveiling of the museum’s KB-50J tanker aircraft. The AMCM tells the history of American military airlift and aerial refueling; the KB-50 is the third tanker aircraft in the museum’s inventory.

Postponed from 2020 due to the coronavirus, the occasion also was a solemn one, marking the nationwide organization’s final get-together.

The planes were in the Air Force inventory from 1956 until they were retired in 1965 following the discovery of metal fatigue and internal corrosion. All but two were scrapped.

The other intact tanker, also a KB-50J, remains at an Arizona museum.

The AMCM’s KB-50J was on static display at the National Museum of the United States Air Force for 30 years, then in 1996 was transferred to MacDill AFB, Tampa, Fl., for display in the base memorial park.

The aircraft was disassembled in late 2017, with pieces brought to the AMC Museum, where repairs began.

What greeted the 70-odd TAC Tanker veterans, their wives, and family members that Saturday was an aircraft still under repair. Three decades in Florida’s humid, salty climate caused significant damage to the entire airframe, and a lack of workers due to coronavirus pandemic put the restoration process severely behind schedule.

In deciding to disband, the TAC Tanker Association provided a $25,000 grant that the Air Mobility Command Museum Foundation used to buy supplies and replacement parts. The funds paid for everything from rivets to new Plexiglas observation bubbles that will be mounted on the airplane’s fuselage.

The rehabilitation work will not make the aircraft flightworthy again but will give visitors to the AMCM an idea of how a vital Cold War aircraft appeared at its peak.

Following the ceremony and a tour of the AMC Museum, the tanker veterans were treated to lunch at the nearby Little Creek Fire Hall, catered by Dover’s Mission BBQ restaurant.

With the AMC Museum’s recent reopening, visitors will be able to watch some of the repair work as it goes on. The restoration program is expected to take several more years.

From the Director:
The Air Mobility Command Museum was extremely proud to host the TAC Tanker Association members during their 2021 reunion. Volunteers and staff have been working tirelessly to restore KB-50J 49-0389 for the past three years, and to be able to share the results of that labor with those who flew and maintained these aircraft, along with their families, was a true honor and pleasure. The TAC Tanker Association has been a stalwart supporter of the restoration efforts for 49-0389, and without their help, we would not be where we are today in preserving one of the last examples of this aircraft; a lasting memorial to the legacy of the service and sacrifice of the members of the Tactical Air Command during the Cold War.

Johnny Taylor
Director
Air Mobility Command Museum
Dover Air Force Base, Del.
KB-50 restoration

An old warrior comes back to life, piece by piece

Work to restore the AMC Museum’s KB-50J Superfortress began almost immediately after parts of the aircraft arrived at Dover Air Force Base, Del., late in 2017. More than three years later, restoration crews still are hard at work, and they’re looking at perhaps another 36 months before everything is complete. The project hit a major snag when coronavirus restrictions completely shut down the AMC Museum, including its restoration shop.

His work at the AMC Museum includes three restoration projects before the Superfortress.

“I had worked with the restoration crews at the Museum in the early 2000s but had moved on,” Maurer said. “They were putting the KB-50 back together and were looking for a crew chief, so I volunteered.

“I didn’t know what shape it was in, then I went out to the airplane and starting finding all sorts of issues.”

From bomber to tanker

The aircraft that was to become the B-50 bomber was developed from the venerable Boeing B-29 Superfortress, the key to the United States’ successful air campaign in the Pacific Theater of World War II.

Among other improvements, the B-50 had almost 60 percent more power than the B-29, had a higher vertical tail that could be folded to fit into conventional aircraft hangars and had wings made of an aluminum alloy that were 16 percent stronger.

The Boeing Aircraft Company built 371 B-50s between 1947 and 1953. In addition to the standard airframe, other versions included the RB-50B, used for strategic reconnaissance, the WB-50 weather reconnaissance aircraft and the TB-50H, used for aircrew training.

According to records provided by the National Museum of the United States Air Force, the AMC Museum’s Superfortress aerial tanker, tail No. 49-0389, was built as a B-50D at the Boeing plant in Seattle, Wash., and delivered to the Air Force on Dec. 14, 1950. It first served at Hunter AFB, now Hunter AAF, Savannah, Ga., as part of the Strategic Air Command’s (SAC) 2nd Bombardment (Medium) Wing.

In November 1953, it was sent to the 3040th Aircraft Storage Depot at Davis-Monthan AFB, Tucson, Ariz. Work to modify the airframe to a KB-50 configuration began in November 1956 at the Hayes Aircraft Company in Birmingham, Ala.; upon completion in June 1957, it was transferred to the 431st Air Refueling Squadron at Turner AFB, Albany, Ga.

The aircraft underwent the KB-50J conversion starting in April 1958. When completed, it was returned to the 431st, which in July 1959 was transferred to Biggs AFB, now Biggs AAF, El Paso, Texas. The aircraft continued at Biggs until February 15, 1965, when it was flown to the United States Air Force Museum (now the National Museum of the United States Air Force) at Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio.

The aircraft was repainted with the distinctive markings and registry number of a plane assigned to the 421st ARS, aka, the Rainbow Squadron, of Yokota Air Base, Japan. Museum records do not indicate why the change was made.

The Superfortress remained on outside display until 1996, when it was transferred to MacDill AFB, Tampa, Fla. There, the plane became the centerpiece of the base’s air memorial park, situated a short distance from the Gulf of Mexico. It remained at MacDill for just over 20 years. (For more on the airpark, see the story on Page 9.)

In December 2017, crews from Worldwide Aircraft of Springfield, Mo., began

A four-man crew from Worldwide Aircraft Recovery works on removing the KB-50J’s wings and engines in 2017 at MacDill AFB, Fla.

“Our goal really hasn’t changed. I’m sticking to my original date of 2025,” KB-50J crew chief and volunteer Tim Maurer said at the end of June 2021. “We were just talking about what we’re doing on the flight deck, and we think it will take at least until the end of 2021 to get just the rear part back together.

“There’s so much detail involved, so many things you have to do.”

Maurer is a 21-year Air Force retiree who is the founder and CEO of Eleventh Hour Technical Solutions. He used his background as a C-5 flight engineer to establish the Dover-based company that develops user-friendly technical data publications.

At Dover, another crew from Worldwide Aircraft works to secure the KB-50J’s tail section to the remainder of the fuselage.

Tim Maurer demonstrates the effect of Florida’s humid and salt air on the KB-50J’s internal structure. Some parts of the aircraft were literally held together by its external skin. Many internal stringers had to be replaced by newly fabricated parts.

Photo courtesy Ralph Pettersen

Photo courtesy Tim Maurer
The aircraft’s refurbished throttle controls look as good as the day they were built back in 1950.

Tim Maurer works on the KB-50J’s flight deck window panels in late 2019. The aircraft’s pilot and copilot stations had been removed earlier.

dismantling the KB-50J. Dover C-5M crews, using the opportunity as a training session, brought the horizontal stabilizer and tail section to Delaware just before Christmas.

The remainder arrived by truck several weeks later, and work began to reassemble and restore the aircraft.

All sorts of issues
Maurer said the AMCM’s restoration crews were stunned when they began an inspection of the newly arrived KB-50J, finding the damage caused by years of exposure to the Floridian climate was much worse than initially thought.

To make a formal record of the plane’s condition, the Air Mobility Command Museum Foundation contracted for a structural survey that revealed extensive corrosion to the flight deck, lower fuselage, and wings. Animal debris inside the structure showed the plane had been home to numerous birds and other small creatures over the years.

From the beginning, restoration work was helped by archivists at Boeing, who dug through their files and provided copies of original construction blueprints. These decades-old plans allowed workers to locate internal structures without having to cut holes in the metal skin.

Maurer said the restoration work was not intended to make the KB-50J fly again but to ensure the 70-year-old aircraft was sound enough to support its weight, not to mention withstanding Delaware’s sometimes gale-force winter winds.

“When Boeing designed this plane, it was supposed to have a certain design life, and then they moved on to the next design,” he said. “They didn’t plan on it being around this long.”

“The problem is that the alloy they used to build the airplane, while strong in high tensile strength, is highly corrosive. It was a tradeoff. What we’re responding to now is corrosion in all of the of the primary structure.”

The wing spars were of particular concern: Boeing fabricated the wings using 7075 aluminum, a zinc alloy that’s extremely strong but brittle when heated. This characteristic restricted what areas could be welded during the restoration team’s repair process.

Maurer’s crew also found time and the elements had caused support members inside the fuselage to fragment and the exterior skin to separate from the ribs and framing. Earlier restoration efforts had accelerated the problem by using metals that caused a chemical reaction with the 7075 aluminum. Essentially, the metal had begun to disintegrate.

The worst corrosion was found where inches of water had pooled in lower sections after leaking in around windows and holes.

Maurer’s team called on their ingenuity — and a lot of manual labor — to fix the worst of the problems, recreating missing and seriously damaged parts in the Museum’s restoration shop.

“There are some things that we had to re-do, refabricate,” Maurer said. “But the biggest thing we had to do is just go in there and muscle the old pieces out, what’s left of them, and put new pieces in.”

In taking the KB-50 apart, Maurer’s crew found forgotten reminders of ’50s and ’60s life: a paperback novel, aspirin bottles, and even can openers, known as “church keys,” from C-rations, all tucked away in odd places.

(Continued on Page 6)
same mindset that it should be done, and it should be done right.

Due to a lack of space, the public will not have access to the interior of the aircraft, even when it’s finished, Maurer said. Regardless, the inside restoration work is just as crucial as that done on the exterior: everything needs to look authentic.

“If a panel was green, it will be green again. If a switch was red, it will be red again,” Maurer said. “We’re trying to duplicate everything as much as possible.”

The restoration crews have received a massive amount of help from active duty and Reserve airmen on the other side of Dover AFB.

Much of the structural restoration work has been accomplished by Reservists, said sheet metal expert Mike Kuberski.

“The entire time I’ve been out at the Museum, I’ve had multiple rounds of trainees out there for training,” he said. “The KB-50 is a great training tool to get hands-on training with metal repairs, as well as identifying the types of corrosion that has run rampant on the KB-50.”

The KB-50 is continuing, mostly on structural work. Much of the structural restoration work has been accomplished by Reservists, said sheet metal expert Mike Kuberski.

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The group comprises former aircrews, ground crews, and administrative personnel from the six units that flew either the KB-29 or KB-50 during the Cold War.

In addition to small items such as batting and thread to repair seating, the grant paid to replace the port and starboard Plexiglas observation bubbles, control wheels in the cockpit, and latches to secure the engine cowlings and hatches.

“We’ve had to re-do all the wiring harnesses and plumbing, and we changed out millions of nut plates,” Maurer said. “We had to go in and tear everything out, remove the old hardware, repair the corrosion and then reinstall it all. We’ve even cleaned all the clamps that hold the wiring in place.”

And while the restoration work often relies on old-fashioned elbow grease for cleaning up and repairing corrosion, it also has taken advantage of some 21st-century know-how.

Case in point: replacing throttle handles on the aircraft’s flight deck.

The original handles, made of a plastic-like material, were too deteriorated to use, so replacements were fabricated using 3-D printing technology. The new handles were created at Dover AFB’s BEDROCK innovative technology laboratory.

One area at a time

Restoration work done up until May 15, 2021, was on full display when members of the TAC Tanker Association visited the AMC Museum that Saturday to rededicate the aircraft.

Maurer and his team had removed the 421st ARS rainbow emblem from the nose and restored the aircraft’s original tail number for the visit.

They also had reworked the plane’s No. 1 propeller.

“That really needed to be done. It looked like hell,” he said. “So we stripped it down, treated the corrosion, and repainted it. It took three weeks to do one propeller.

“It’s a lot of work, and you just don’t realize how big that thing is until you have to strip it down.”

“We’ll be doing the other three as well.”

In late June, more than six weeks after the airplane’s rededication, work on the KB-50 is continuing, mostly on structural issues, Maurer said.

“We had sheet metal experts from the base Reserves come out and pulled the skin off the right side,” he said. “We’re waiting for them to free up some time when they’re not too busy to come back.

“As far as progress on the interior, we’re reinstalling equipment racks in the aft portion of the forward compartment. We’re reinstalling the navigator’s position, and once the racks are in, we’ll repopulate them with the equipment and wiring that goes in there.”

But there’s still so much more to do, he said.

“Except for the No. 1 engine and some cowling, we haven’t even touched the wings yet,” Maurer said. “Some of it has been reskinned, but there are other areas that desperately need a lot of work, like the landing gear, the wheel wells, and the jets.

“We’re focusing on one area at a time.”
Saving the KB-50J
Without the TAC Tankers, 389 would be scrap

Stories about crews saving their airplane in wartime often are dramatized with heroic men fighting stolidly at their posts, sometimes sacrificing themselves for their fellows, and, if successful, returning home just barely alive.

But saving an airplane in peacetime, especially one that has not flown in decades, takes even more determination, along with a trait known to many in the military – a refusal to give up.

Those characteristics have been on full display for more than 20 years as members of the TAC Tanker Association (TTA) worked to bring a historic Cold War aircraft to the Air Mobility Command Museum at Dover Air Force Base, Del. Without their tireless efforts, one of the last two surviving KB-50J aircraft, a tactical mainstay of America’s global power during the 1950s and 1960s, easily could have been turned into an unrecognizable pile of scrap.

This desire to save at least one of those KB-50s was the focus of the TTA’s first reunion, held in 2000 in Tucson, Ariz. Some might think this locale was an odd choice, given that none of the tanker units had been stationed in the Grand Canyon State.

But there was a reason.

One of the two remaining KB-50s, Tail No. 49-0389 was on display at a commemorative airport at MacDill AFB, Tampa, Fla.

The other, Tail No. 49-0372 was on display at the Pima Air and Space Museum in Graham Co., Ariz.

“They decided they wanted to save [372], and they all chipped in money to take care of the plane,” recalled Natalie Hill, the TTA’s vice president for information and activities.

No commitment and no confidence

The collected money was intended for 372’s upkeep and eventual restoration, she said. But, while initially enthusiastic about the TTA’s attention, Pima’s interest slowly waned as time went on.

By December 2003, TTA members had raised a little more than $8,000 toward 372’s restoration. But other than replacing some tires from Pima’s in-house stockpile at no cost to the TTA, nothing else had been done to the aircraft. Moreover, museum officials told TTA membership it would be at least an additional 18 months before any progress could be made toward restoring the aircraft – if anything were done at all.

Pima officials also ruled out building a protective structure around the plane, citing the estimated $75,000 price tag as too expensive.

Unhappy with the lack of progress, TTA membership voted in 2004 to withhold additional donations unless the museum made an official commitment toward 372’s restoration.

“It turned out [the TTA] raised the money but during the next few years found out [Pima] would not do anything with it,” Hill said.

TTA Board of Governors Chairman Dan Weber signaled the group’s displeasure in a February 2005 letter to the Pima museum.

“We want to know that the funds earmarked for this project which includes our donations, are being utilized for that purpose and in a timely manner.

“At present, we have no assurance of this,” he wrote.

Unable or perhaps unwilling to make a firm commitment, the Pima museum refunded the TTA’s entire investment, totaling $8,345.

Disappointed in this turn of events TTA members turned their attention instead to wresting 389 away from its static display base in Florida.

“We’d have given money to [the Pima] museum if they’d restore that airplane, but they never did,” TTA President Vic Ventura said. “Then we decided we probably could get the one at MacDill.”

But while MacDill’s wing commander was amenable to giving up the aircraft, as a former refueling pilot, she wanted another tanker in return, namely a KC-135.

It took several months of intense networking, but the effort finally seemed to bear fruit.

In September 2006, AMC vice commander Lt. Gen. Chris Kelly wrote to the TTA’s board that “Once the appropriate paperwork is accomplished and a KC-135 becomes available to replace the KB-50J on static display, Air Mobility Command will coordinate the relocation.”

It turned out that finding an available KC-135 would not be an easy task.

A done deal

MacDill receiving a KC-135 was contingent on the Air Force retiring one of the Stratotankers, which already were pushing 50 years of service. But it was probable none of those still vital aircraft would be withdrawn from the inventory until a new series of tanker aircraft was in the air.

Seeing as the Air Force had only recently called for bids on the KC-135’s replacement, it did not look as if Kelly’s pledge would come true any time soon.

There were more delays. It took almost two years for the Air Force to resolve a dispute between two competitors for the new tanker contract, meaning that with no replacement for the KC-135, the KB-50 would continue indefinitely on display at MacDill.

The situation was muddied further when, after finally retiring some KC-135s, the Air Force transferred an “E” model to the AMC Museum. The TTA learned that aircraft was not tagged for MacDill because its then-wing commander was adamant about only accepting an “R” model.

By late 2013, a new command team was in charge at MacDill and things took a small step forward. Faced with the mounting costs of continually refurbishing their static display aircraft, base officials, including the wing commander, dropped their demand for a KC-135.

Retired AMC Museum Director Mike Leister reported it would cost an estimated $75,000 to bring the KB-50 to Dover; although funds were short at the time, he felt the money would be forthcoming. He also wanted to arrange for a C-5 to help with the move.

“I had started talking to the TTA several years before we were able to get the leader-

(Continued on Page 8)
TAC Tankers Association

Founded to preserve a long and honorable legacy

Founded in October 1998, the TAC Tankers Association was made up of aircrew, maintenance, and administrative personnel from all eight of the Air Force refueling and support squadrons that flew the KB-50 and its predecessor, the KB-29 from 1953 through 1965.

They included the Tactical Air Command’s 4505th Air Refueling Wing at Langley AFB, Va., whose subordinate units included the 427th Air Refueling Squadron (ARS) at Robins AFB, Ga., and Langley; the 429th ARS at Langley, the 431st ARS at Turner moved to Biggs AFB, Texas, the 622nd ARS at England AFB, La., and the 4505th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Langley.

Other units were the 420th ARS, at England AFB, La., which later moved to RAF Sculthorpe, U.K., and the 421st ARS at Yokota AB, Japan.

It was through a $25,000 donation from the TAC Tankers Association that the AMC Museum was able to carry on restoration of its KB-50J aircraft.

The TTA came together thanks to a group of former crew members who had been keeping in touch with friends who also had flown or worked on tankers, Natalie Hill, the group’s vice president for activities said. They met in Macon, Ga., decided to pool their contacts lists, and eventually formed and incorporated the group.

The group’s then-vice president (and later Natalie Hill’s husband), the late retired USAF Lt. Col. Nathaniel “Nate” Hill, started work on their first reunion.

“He went and sent out invitations to the world,” Natalie said. “He got a tremendous response back.”

Nate Hill later became president of the TTA, serving until his death in April 2014.

Their first reunion was held in April 2000, in Tucson, Ariz.

Their gathering at Dover in May 2021 – their 22nd – was their last.

Over the years the TTA included more than 1,000 members, holding their annual gettogethers as well as regular meetings, and sending out a quarterly, eight-page newsletter chock full of news and photos. Many former tankers contributed their stories and photographs, allowing historian John Bessette to compile a comprehensive history of each refueling squadron.

These airmen, like many of their fellow servicemen, worked long hours and overcame many obstacles and dangers. Some lost their lives in service to their country.

“Through all the hardships and sacrifices we should always take a moment to remember those who are no longer with us,” current TTA President Vic Ventura said. “In particular we might bow our heads and say a prayer for those who were never able to make a reunion.”

Not to be forgotten were the wives of these men, who held their families together while waiting for each to return from a mission.

Ventura said.

“We should always remember and pay tribute to our family members who sacrificed so much supporting each of us,” he said. “Each of them earned and can proudly wear the TAC Tanker badge of dignity.”

(Continued from Page 7)

ship at MacDill to allow us to acquire it,” Leister recalled.

“Along the way, we asked the TTA for funding if we were able to get the plane. They agreed,” he said. “They knew we wanted it almost as badly as they wanted to have it in a museum.”

“Their only stipulation at that time was that [the AMCM] would not get the money until we had the aircraft.”

Early in 2016, the TTA’s officers and board had approved a $25,000 contribution toward restoration of the KB-50 once it was at Dover. By autumn of that year, the move was official.

Ventura reported the news in the group’s newsletter. A staffer at MacDill had convinced the new wing commander “that the cost of maintaining 389 just wasn’t worth it,” he said.

“Since the Dover museum and the TAC Tankers had already committed to implementing this project, it became a done deal,” Ventura said. Shortly after that, Ventura learned Dover officials were working on awarding the appropriate contracts. Funding was obtained for the entire operation, and work to disassemble the KB-50 began in December 2017.

Parts of the aircraft arrived at Dover just before Christmas, with the remainder following in January.

Ventura’s first reaction upon seeing 389 at Dover was astonishment at the amount of cribbing, or wooden support structures, needed to support the newly reassembled aircraft.

“When things are falling apart, you need a lot of cribbing to hold the framework together,” he said. “You could tell just from that the plane’s framework was pretty shot. That told me how bad it had to be.”

Although the KB-50 was in much worse condition than first thought, Ventura was pleased with what he had seen. His tour of the museum and the restoration shop, courtesy of Deputy Director Eric Czerwinski and crew chief Tim Maurer cemented that opinion.

“It was pointed out this is the toughest project that they have ever taken on,” Ventura said, “but they are happy to do it as 389 is the most rare aircraft in their inventory.”

It’s taken more than 20 years, and many TTA members who worked to make the KB-50’s transfer happen were no longer alive to witness its dedication on May 15, 2021.

“For those unfamiliar, you could look at it and think there’s still a lot of work to be done,” he said. “But for someone with a trained eye, they’d recognize a lot has been done. That made me extremely happy.”

Ventura thinks the late TAC Tanker President Nate Hill also would be pleased.

“I believe Nate and all those guys who worked on this, all the way from the beginning, would be proud,” he said. “This is what they worked for. They’d be elated.”

“This is what [the TTA] wanted to happen,” Ventura said. “The Air Mobility Command Museum has got it all when it comes to aerial refueling, and you guys do a great job. From the first time I went down there, I knew you knew what you were doing, I knew the TAC Tankers were going in the right direction.”
MacDill AFB, Fla.
A temporary stopover on 389’s path to the AMCM

A quarter-century ago, Joe Voskerichian happily completed a community effort to bring a KB-50 to MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Fla. In 2021, he’s just as pleased to see that same aircraft on display at the Air Mobility Command Museum.

“I was so proud we were able to find a KB-50 back then, and I’m just tickled to death that your Museum has it now,” Voskerichian said.

The 87-year-old Tampa resident is executive director of the Gold Shield Foundation, a charity started by New York Yankees principal owner George Steinbrenner. The group provides financial assistance to the families of fallen firefighters and police officers.

But in 1996, Voskerichian was president of the nonprofit MacDill AFB Memorial Park Foundation, a group dedicated to establishing an airpark on the Florida base. The planned park would highlight MacDill’s history through static displays of four aircraft: the F-4 Phantom, an F-16 Fighting Falcon, a B-50 Superfortress bomber, and a B-17 Flying Fortress or B-24 Liberator.

Ultimately, the group never was able to secure a World War II-era aircraft. They also could not procure a B-50, accepting instead a KB-50 tanker.

Money for the $225,000 project was raised through public donations, corporate contributions, and even inscribed bricks later used in the park’s circular walkway.

“We needed a lot of money,” Voskerichian said. “The base commander couldn’t go out and ask for money, so I went to the community and said they needed to contribute.”

The project was vitally important to Voskerichian, a Buffalo, N.Y., native who made the Tampa area home after his own five-year Air Force career.

“I just love the Air Force, and I love MacDill AFB,” he said.

Voskerichian said obtaining the KB-50 entailed negotiations with the United States Air Force Museum (now the National Museum of the United States Air Force) at Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio. The museum owns all Air Force aircraft on display throughout its extended system, including the AMC Museum.

What was to become MacDill AFB’s KB-50 had been exhibited on a ramp outside the USAF Museum since 1965. Voskerichian said. After gaining the USAF Museum’s approval, the aircraft was disassembled and trucked to the Florida base. Due to its size, it was rebuilt on site, with a rededication ceremony held for the tanker and the F-16 on April 12, 1996. The F-4 had been put in place a year earlier.

For years, the airpark served as a community gathering place, home to retirement and remembrance ceremonies and other special events.

But time began to take its toll on the park, particularly on its three aircraft.

Changes in operations at MacDill meant military corrosion specialists could no longer keep any of the aircraft in good shape. Instead, responsibility for their upkeep was left to civilian contractors, who occasionally touched up exterior paint and sealed leaks, trying to keep water out.

But it wasn’t enough.

By September 2016, an inspection of all three aircraft by NMUSAF structural specialists showed the F-4’s condition was so bad it had become a safety hazard. As a result, the aircraft was removed from the park and sent to the scrapyard. With restoration money short and time continuing to degrade the remaining aircraft, base officials started plans to remove and dispose of the F-16 and KB-50 as well.

For the near-half-century-old KB-50, the damage was particularly extreme. Florida’s salt air, humidity, and the occasional hurricane had wreaked havoc on the old airframe.

In a 2017 press release announcing the move, MacDill AFB historian Steve Ove said, “Maintaining the historic static display aircraft in our highly corrosive environment is destructive to these irreplaceable artifacts. Additionally, the aircraft needs to be restored every so often, and it isn’t very cost-effective for the base.”

So, despite MacDill’s no longer having three historic aircraft on public display, Voskerichian is not dismayed.

Instead, he’s pleased the newly restored KB-50 will be used to tell the story of aerial refueling and plans to come by the AMC Museum to see the aircraft in its new home.

“I’m really tickled with what [the AMC is] doing with it,” he said. “You’re giving it another life.”

Retired MacDill AFB Wing Commander Col. Charles Ohlinger, Wing Commander Brig. Gen. James N. Soligan, Tampa Mayor Dick Greco, retired Col. Ron Buchhart, and MacDill AFB Memorial Park Foundation President Joe Voskerichian, attend the memorial park dedication on Jan. 19, 1999.

KB-50J Tail No. 49-0389 was put on static display at the MacDill AFB Memorial Park. Although the aircraft had been assigned to the 431st ARS at Biggs AFB, Texas, it was given Tail No. 48-0114 after its transfer to the United States Air Force Museum and painted in the livery of the 421st Air Refueling Squadron (the “Rainbow Squadron”) at Yokota AB, Japan. The plane’s original designation was restored when it went on display at the Air Mobility Command Museum.

B-50 TRIVIA
The last flight of the B-50 airframe actually took place more than 15 years after the fleet itself was retired.

Although a single B-50 had been flown at Wright-Patterson AFB in March 1968, a weather-service variant, a WB-50D, Tail No. 49-351, was flown from the Boneyard to Castle AFB, Calif., in mid-December 1980. The aircraft had been put back into flying condition using parts from a retired KC-97 and ferried to California by then-SAC Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Andrew Pringle.

The plane, nicknamed “Flight of the Phoenix,” remains on display at the Castle Museum.
The decade of the 1950s was unlike any other when it came to how American men viewed military service. The sons of World War II were coming of age amid the spectre of Communism and its threat to the American way of life. Yet, ever mindful of their fathers’ service and having heard tales of strange and exotic places all over the globe, these young men not only looked for adventure around the world, but for the chance to honorably serve their country.

Of the military services, the Air Force seemed most likely to offer that chance. Only recently divorced from the US Army, the Air Force promised space-age innovation and exciting new ways of thinking. Of course, there were other motivations, but for forward-thinking young men, a future in the skies was a calling they could not fight.

Every man in the TAC Tanker Association – there were no women on aircrews back then – served at some time during the 1950s and 1960s. Some had a family tradition of service; others became the first to serve. Some did only a few years; others went on to decades in uniform. All have good, bad, funny, and sometimes sad recollections of their service. For some, the details may have faded somewhat over the years, but the experiences by all KB-50 aircrews during their careers remain treasured memories.

Edwin A. ‘Tex’ Arnold
Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Edwin A. “Tex” Arnold was one of those young men.
A graduate of both the Valley Forge Military Academy and Lehigh University, Arnold grew up with his sights set on the sky. “I’d wanted to pursue a military career since an early age,” he said. With the Air Force in need of pilots, he earned a second lieutenant’s commission upon graduation from Lehigh in June 1955. He was awarded his pilot’s wings two years later.
His first assignment in the KB-50 was with the 429th ARS.
KB-50 flights usually meant training missions as well as refueling flights where crews would meet up with some of the Air Force’s newest fighter aircraft. Admittedly, however, it could be a bit routine.
“If we weren’t on the flight schedule, we’d come in for roll call in the morning, complete any ground school, then be free for the rest of the day,” Arnold recalled.
A significant and not necessarily welcome break came during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, where members of the 429th refueled RF-101s off the coast of South Florida.
The Voodoo was an unarmed single-seat reconnaissance aircraft that took low-altitude photographs of suspected Soviet missile sites on the Communist-held island, less than 100 miles from American shores. They also helped verify the sites were being dismantled as the crisis wound down.
Despite the tensions, Arnold said he was not worried about prospects for nuclear war during the crisis.
“Our duties didn’t change very much,” he said. “It was nice to be doing something other than training sorties.”
Although the KB-50 airframe had been in service for more than a dozen years while he was in the cockpit, its age raised no concerns for the young pilot. He had welcomed the addition of the J-47 engines beginning in 1958; adding the two jets gave “a big boost in overall performance.”
“I never worried about the age of the aircraft,” Arnold said. “I figured all of the bugs had been worked out by then. When some-thing malfunctioned, we just dealt with it. I don’t remember the aircraft having major structural problems.”
Following his time flying the KB-50J, Arnold served a tour in Thailand, where he was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and later at Westover AFB, near Springfield, Mass., piloting KC-135s and EC-135s for the Strategic Air Command.
Retiring from the Air Force in 1977, Arnold pursued his avocation of sports car racing, winning more than a dozen division championships and competing against racing stars such as Sir Stirling Moss, Roger Penske, Bobby Rahal, and Gilles Villeneuve. He is a 2007 inductee into the Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame and a 2013 inductee into the Colorado Motorsports Hall of Fame.
Now living in Parker, Colorado, Arnold, 88, keeps busy restoring old formula race cars.

William J. ‘Pappy’ Boyington
Let’s get this cleared up right away: Jim “Pappy” Boyington of the TAC Tankers Association is not the famous World War II Medal of Honor recipient. As far as he knows, he’s not even distantly related.
“But I did meet his son once,” Boyington said. “That’s about it.”
Looking to avoid the military draft during the Korean War, the Hartford, Conn. native enlisted in the Air Force in 1953 at the age of 19 but qualified as an aviation cadet while in basic training.

“But I washed out of pilot school, so they asked if I wanted to be a navigator,” Boyington said. “I told them, ‘Hell, yeah, I’ll do that.’”

Assigned to the 421st ARS at Yokota Air Base, Japan, in June 1956, the newly-married second lieutenant and his wife were the first couple stationed there under concurrent travel orders.

Flying in the KB-50 – before the addition of the J-47 jet engines – could be an adventure, Boyington recalled.

“During takeoff, you’d hit a go/no-go decision point,” he said. “If you lost an engine beyond that point, you could not stop the airplane. But you also didn’t have enough power to get off the ground. So every takeoff was an adventure.

“That changed when we got the J-47s; there was no question you were going to fly with those. You wouldn’t end up crashing at the end of the runway.”

Although the maintenance personnel did their jobs well, it sometimes was difficult to get repair parts.

“We were in the Fifth Air Force, and it was the red-headed step-child of the Air Force. And the tankers were the red-headed step-children of the Fifth. We were at the end of a very long supply chain,” Boyington said.

Only four months before Boyington was to leave Yokota, tensions between the Communist People’s Republic of China and the democratic Republic of China came to a head when the Communists shelled the tiny coastal islands of Quemoy and Matsu. The United States responded by sending fighter aircraft to support the Taiwanese government and ordered the 421st to provide the necessary inflight refueling.

“That was a scary time; we didn’t know if it would be the start of World War III,” Boyington said. “We’d refuel the B-66 Destroyers and later the F-100s. They were on nuke alert.

“We’d refuel them at unusual locations going in unusual directions. We were told to refuel them and where they were going was none of our business. So we never talked about it.”

Boyington was at the 421st when a squadron KB-50 went down in May 1957. Four men escaped by parachute, but one, who was none of our business. So we never talked about it.

Boyington now admits he might have been the instigator of a row between the Air Force and Navy over a salvaged ship’s bell.

“The Navy guys had this bell at a bar, and if someone walked in with their hat on, they’d ring the bell, and the guy would have to buy drinks.

“I thought to myself that bell would look good at Yokota.”

And that’s where it ended up. Scuttlebutt had it that a young Air Force navigator was behind the theft, and some angry letters were exchanged between senior officers in both services. To this day, Boyington doesn’t know what happened to that bell after the 421st closed down in 1965.

Following his tour at Yokota, Boyington went on to teach navigation and later became a maintenance officer. He retired in 1973, then began working with the Department of Energy refueling the US Navy’s nuclear power plants.

Nowadays, Boyington considers himself a snowbird and regularly moves between Spokane, Wash., and Ft. Walton Beach, Fla. Boyington looks upon his time navigating KB-50s as one of the highlights of his military service.

“For me, it was rewarding as a young second lieutenant to get into an outfit like the 421st,” he said. “The officers and NCOs gave me a really sound basis for my career. It was like a doctorate program in how to be a good officer.”

Louis H. ‘Lou’ Chapman

Lou Chapman has been a Lifetime member of the TAC Tanker Association since March 2003 and has served the organization for more than three times longer than the time he spent in the Air Force. He became the TTA’s membership chairman in 2008 and was elected vice president for membership in May 2010.

Like many others, Chapman was drawn to the Air Force by a love of airplanes.

“There was a train station south of our place when we lived in Palo Alto, Calif., during World War II, and all the time, I’d see servicemen getting off the train and walking past our house,” he said. “I also could just lay in the yard and look overhead and see flights of airplanes heading for Oakland, Alameda, or the Port of San Francisco.

“Just being exposed to all of that, I thought that I’d love to be able to fly an airplane.”

Chapman enlisted into the Air Force in February 1958 in Los Angeles.

While taking the train to basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, one of his fellow enlistees talked about signing up as a refueling operator.

“He explained to me what it was about, and I said I was going to put in for it, too,” Chapman said. During basic, was told he could choose almost any career field because of his high scores on Air Force aptitude tests.

That didn’t happen. The adage, “The needs of the Air Force,” reared its head; at the time, the Air Force needed mechanics for its C-124s, RB-50s, WB-50s, and KB-50s more than it needed refueling specialists. Chapman found himself bound for reciprocating engine mechanic school at Chanute AFB, Ill., although he was told this could be a stepping stone to eventually becoming a refueling operator.

After graduation in August 1958, he was sent to the 421st Air Refueling Squadron at Yokota Air Base, Japan.

The 421st had swapped its KB-29 fleet for KB-50Ds a year earlier; the D models were then upgraded to the KB-50J with the addition of two General Electric J-47 jet engines.

“My job was to keep those planes flying,” Chapman said. “I was straight out of tech school, and the KB-50 was the first plane I’d ever worked on. They’d been converted from the B-50 bombers, and they had a lot of time on them. So I learned a lot of things they hadn’t taught in tech school.

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“There were many different squadrons at Yokota, and you could look across the flight line and see B-47s, B-50s, B-57s, RB-50s, WB-50s, C-119s, and F-86s.”

Not being a jet mechanic, Chapman wasn’t used to some of the procedures used on those aircraft. One day he was startled by an explosion from the other side of the flight line.

“I was sitting there on the post-flight dock on top of the engine, heard a loud noise, saw smoke, and thought one of those airplanes had blown up,” he said. “The sergeant said it was only the explosive cartridges they used to start up the B-57s.”

Despite the shiny, ultra-modern appearance of the Stratojet, Canberra, and Sabre aircraft, Chapman preferred the less sleek KB-50.

With all those aircraft on the base, I thought it was the most amazing airplane I’d ever seen and that I would get to work on them,” he said.

Despite Chapman’s love of the aircraft, the KB-50 occasionally pulled a surprise.

“We had one of our planes coming back, and when it lost one of the J-47s. Up in the cockpit, they’d felt a jolt but didn’t know what had happened.

“The right scanner replied, ‘J-2 just departed the aircraft,’” Chapman said. “This was the first of a lot of jet engines falling off, as the other squadrons later reported.

The missing engine eventually was found in a nearby rice paddy.

In another instance, the jet engine’s crew chief was doing a full run-up test when the engine broke loose and flew off the wing.

“My buddies and I were off like we were running the 100-yard dash,” Chapman recalled.

“We thought something was going to blow up. If the aircraft had been backed in, the engine would have probably come toward us.”

After two years in Japan, Chapman transferred to Turnover AFB, Albany, Ga.

He ended his career there working on RB-50s. That wasn’t something he’d wanted, however.

Chapman and others got caught up in the promotion squeeze of the late 1950s/early 1960s in that young airmen were not getting promoted despite having responsibilities more in line with those of a non-commissioned officer.

“I was supervising five people when our sergeant was away at school, and I was an airman second class (E-3),” he said. “We could not get promoted even though we’d been given an involuntary one-year extension during the Berlin crisis. I planned to make the Air Force a career, but that’s one reason I decided to get out.

“I told them that if I were promoted, I’d reenlist but was told I had to reenlist first. They wouldn’t guarantee I’d get the extra stripe.

“There were a lot of guys who really got burned because of that. They were super-qualified, but if the Air Force hadn’t had that attitude, there would have been a lot more people making it a career.”

After leaving the Air Force in June 1962, Chapman returned home, where he worked as a warehouseman, then as a local and long-haul driver for Certified Grocers of California in Los Angeles. He retired in 1999 and today lives in Acampo, Calif., with his wife, Susan.

“We’re right here in wine country, amidst the grape vineyards, cherry orchards, and walnut groves,” he said.

Allan N. Desin

Allan Desin is California-born and bred. In fact, the only time the 88-year-old retired pilot has lived outside the Golden State was while he was in the Air Force.

Desin’s served five years on active duty and another 15 in the Reserves, retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

After completing Berkeley High School, Desin attended the San Francisco State Teachers College, majoring in mathematics and lettering in basketball and track and field. He joined the school’s Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program to avoid the draft during the Korean War. He graduated in 1954, receiving a second lieutenant’s commission.

In 1955, Desin entered primary pilot training and basic training, followed by B-29 advanced training at Randolph Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas.

His first assignment was flying the KB-50H training aircraft out of the 427th Air Refueling Squadron at Robbins AFB, Ga. His first temporary duty assignment was to Clovis AFB (now Cannon AFB), N.M., training F-100 pilots to receive fuel in mid-air.

Desin recalls flying early models of the KB-50 with only the four reciprocating engines to power the aircraft. To Desin, the 9,000-foot runways seemed very short when flying the early model KB-50 before the two J-47 jet engines were added to the airplane.

After that, he said, “It was a lot more fun to fly.”

Desin remained with the 427th after it transferred to Langley AFB, Hampton, Va., flying both training missions and real-world assignments refueling the F-100, F-101, and B-66 aircraft flying to Europe. He also spent about 50 days at McClellan AFB, Sacramento, Calif., refueling F-100s for nonstop flights to Taiwan. Other KB-50s were spending similar temporary duty time in Hawaii, Wake Island, or the Philippines.

Desin was in base operations in August 1959 during his last temporary duty tour on Bermuda when word came in about a KB-50 that had gone down about 200 miles east of the island. He joined a hastily-formed crew and went out to search for the missing aircraft.

The plane, carrying Tail No. 51-0455, had run low on fuel while on a flight from the Azores and landed in the water near a Canadian freighter.

The men aboard Desin’s aircraft spotted the ship and fallen aircraft, with the B-50H sticking up out of the water. They circled the scene, spotting some of the crew members waving at them.
One of the refueling technicians, later identified as Airman 2nd Class Thomas M. Payton, had been trapped in the tail section when it broke off during the landing. His body never was found.

In September 1959, Desin left active duty, joined the Reserves, and for the following 16 years, flew the C-119 Flying Boxcar, C-124 Globemaster II, and C-130 Hercules aircraft from McClellan AFB. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, his squadron was activated and told to prepare to drop paratroopers into Cuba.

Desin now is a retired statistical analyst with the California Franchise Tax Board.

He was contacted in 2000 about a reunion of KB-50 personnel to be held in Tucson, Ariz., and as a result he and Diane, his wife of 67 years, have never missed a subsequent reunion. Their daughter and grandson also attended several of those get-togethers.

Today, the couple live in Sacramento, Calif, less than 90 miles from his birthplace.

**Harold W. “Bill” Elliott**

Every pilot knows their aircraft is nothing more than a multi-million-dollar paperweight if it doesn’t have people to keep it in good mechanical shape.

For three years, Harold W. “Bill” Elliott was one of those mechanics, charged with keeping the KB-50’s four reciprocating engines functioning perfectly. He had worked on aircraft power plants before joining the Air Force, and he continued that profession after his discharge.

The 84-year-old Elliott was raised in Gaylord, a small town set in the middle of Michigan, known chiefly for its outdoor activities.

As a teen, he spent a lot of time at the local airport, where the manager/mechanic taught him how to fly in exchange for helping in the repair shop.

“I benefitted in two ways,” Elliott said. “I learned how to fly and I learned how to repair airplanes. He was a great teacher and he gave me a letter of recommendation to carry when I went into the Air Force.”

Elliott’s first venture into uniform came by joining the US Naval Reserve. After some time, however, and with the Korean conflict essentially having come to an end, he was released from the Reserves.

He saw the Air Force as a way to continue working.

“I wasn’t given any choice in what career field I wanted,” Elliott recalled. “I had experience working on airplanes, so the Air Force made me a reciprocating engine mechanic.

“I was OK with that, except that I was sent to Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina, where I just worked on jets, like the F-86. I never went to an Air Force technical school,” he said.

Later, Elliott was given the choice of an assignment to the 429th Air Refueling Squadron, Langley AFB, Hampton, Va., or the 431st ARS at Turner AFB, Albany, Ga.

“I chose Albany because I just didn’t want to go to Virginia,” he said.

The choice, it turned out, was serendipitous.

“The 431st was a very good unit, and I was satisfied being there,” he said.

Elliott was tasked with keeping the KB-50’s four Pratt & Whitney R-4360 radial engines working smoothly.

The 28-cylinder air-cooled powerplants were monsters: developed at the end of World War II to power the B-50, they later powered aircraft as diverse as the B-36 Peacemaker, the B-35 Flying Wing, and the C-124 Globemaster II, aka Old Shakey.

The engines were produced between 1944 and 1955 and used until the late 1970s.

“I worked on the KB-50 before and after they added the jet engines,” Elliott said. The Air Force had added two General Electric J-47 turbojets to each KB-50 to improve the tanker’s performance, especially when refueling the service’s newest generation of fighter aircraft.

“I only worked on the R-4360s, and I think they were good engines,” Elliott said. “We didn’t have much trouble with them.”

If any part of the engine did prove to be a problem, it was the magneto, which energized the R-4360’s 56 spark plugs.

“The engine had seven dual magneto, and keeping them in time was a big project,” Elliott said. “Otherwise, though, it was a good engine.”

As part of his maintenance activities, Elliott occasionally flew with the tanker crews. He got a bit of a scare on one mission when one of the refueling hoses didn’t retract and the metal coupler on the end dragged along the runway upon landing.

“There was jet fuel in the hose, and it threw up sparks, but nothing happened,” he said.

Another time, one of the J-47 engines dropped off the wing while the aircraft still was on the ground.

“It went up in the air, hit the leading edge of the wing, and was spinning around,” he said. Elliott ran into the airplane and quickly switched off booster pumps that were pouring fuel into the resulting fire.

He never received any credit for an action that probably saved the aircraft.

“I didn’t expect any recognition,” he said. “I just did what needed to be done.”

Unmarried during his time in the service, Elliott enjoyed his work. He earned more pay than his peers because of his prior naval service and said the bosses in the maintenance shop generally allowed the workers to do their jobs without much interference.

“There were four of us on the engine reconditioning team, and we did nothing but troubleshooting. The supervisors didn’t have a heavy hand over us,” he said.

However, frustrated with the lack of promotion opportunities, Elliott decided to take an early discharge, leaving the Air Force with one year left on his contract.

“Rank was very hard to get back then,” he said. “I had the time to become an airman first class (E-4) but didn’t get it.”

Following his discharge, Elliott went back to school and earned both his airframe and powerplant licenses.

He and his wife, Gail, now live in Roseville, Mich., outside Detroit.

“I thought the KB-50 was a pretty good airplane,” he said. “I enjoyed my time in the Air Force, and I’d do it all again.”

(Continued on Page 14)
Robert L. Frazier

As a young man, Robert “Frog” Frazier decided to trade the wide-open plains of his native Oklahoma for the even more wide-open skies of the US Air Force.

Frazier, now 85, earned his commission through the Reserve Officer Training Corps while at Oklahoma State University, where he studied agriculture and animal sciences. He also was a member of the Arnold Air Society, a group dedicated to developing future Air Force officers.

Graduating with the Class of 1958, Frazier received his second lieutenant’s commission and quickly found himself training to be an Air Force navigator.

“That’s what I wanted to do,” he said. “Flying was my first choice.”

His first assignment was to guide KB-50Js in their missions while assigned the 429th Air Refueling Squadron at Langley Air Force Base, Hampton, Va.

Flying various missions to refuel fighters and other aircraft making the hop from the United States, and Europe was important, exciting work.

“If we weren’t flying, it was just another day,” he said.

Many of those missions involved temporary duty to Kindley AFB, Bermuda, or Lajes Field, Azores, both situated in the Atlantic Ocean between the two continents.

Missions to the latter could be unpredictable, with missions sometimes depending on the whims of Mother Nature. Wind storms on the island are particularly severe between November and March.

“If you came out of the Lajes Officer’s Club, you’d check the rotating light beacon at the airfield,” Frazier said. “If it wasn’t rotating because of high winds, you could go back to the bar for another round because there would be no flying that day.”

Frazier was deployed to Lajes during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 but did not fly any missions related to the emergency. Once back at Langley, however, his crew was sent to Florida but flew no missions during their deployment.

Promoted to captain, Frazier left the 429th and transitioned to the 346th Troop Carrier Squadron at Dyess AFB, Abilene, Texas. Flying on the C-130E, he took part in several missions into Vietnam, for which he was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal. He later received the Air Medal, also for missions to Vietnam.

Retiring in 1986 as a lieutenant colonel, Frazier worked in sales for a time but joined the Link Military Simulation Corporation as a navigation instructor for the C-130 simulator at Pope AFB, Fayetteville, N.C.

Vernon F. Gardner

Vern Gardner wanted to join the Air Force so badly he signed up just a few days after his 16th birthday.

“That’s already quit school, and my daddy lied for me,” he said.

“I was in a very disorganized family, and I’d had no guidance, no leadership, and I already was kind of on my own.

“It dawned on me that I wasn’t going anywhere in Baltimore,” Gardner said. “I had this ambition to fly, and I needed a change.”

That decision in September 1950 led Gardner to a career where he navigated aircraft, including the KB-50, all over the world.

But things didn’t look particularly rosy when Gardner first put on a blue uniform. He first had to swear in as an enlisted airman and then wait for admission to the aviation cadet program.

“My first career field was as an admin clerk, and that was far from my first choice,” he said. “My objective was to fly in any assignment possible.”

Gardner graduated from the aviation cadet program and, trained as a navigator, was assigned to the 429th Air Refueling Squadron, Langley Air Force Base, Hampton, Va., in July 1955.

While with the 429th, he served first as a line navigator and then as an instructor and standardization evaluation flight examiner.

A typical day with the 429th consisted primarily of routine refueling flights, training, and practice scrambles. Aircrews were required to get to their aircraft and be ready to launch within a specified period.

The schedule was much the same when deployed to Bermuda, the Azores, or Europe, except for additional planning for future missions or debriefings from assignments just completed, Frazier said.
\textbf{Eugene Henry Jr.}

At age 92, Eugene “Gene” Henry Jr. is among the most senior in the cadre of former KB-50 pilots. He served from 1952 until 1972, retiring as a major.

But even before Henry put on a uniform, he faced a foe almost as insidious as any wartime enemy: racial discrimination. In post-World War II America, he was an individual few could imagine, a black man who felt he could learn to fly.

In 1947, as a senior at the Hillsboro, Ill., High School, Henry made a deal with the owner of the town’s small airport. In exchange for doing odd jobs, he would be paid in flying lessons instead of cash. After months of combined work and study, Henry made his solo flight one morning before reporting to his first-period school class.

Henry calls Hillsboro a “quasi-segregated” town, in that while it had an integrated school system, the races were separated everywhere else. Some of his flight instructors felt that Henry wasn’t up to the task he’d set for himself because he was black.

“My white instructors told me that due to my low math capabilities, I never would be able to master the complicated skills required to pilot an airplane,” he recalled.

Even after achieving his solo flight, those instructors held fast to their beliefs.

“When I reported to them that I had just soloed, I was told that I would never be able to fly the more complicated aircraft of the military.”

But Henry would not be deterred.

“The first reason for joining the military was because I wanted to fly,” he said. “My second reason was that as a graduate of the ROTC program and a commissioned officer, I was obligated to serve.

“I was going to get in the Air Force, one way or another,” Henry said.

“It wasn’t because I’d been watching movies about airplanes,” he said. “When I first saw one in the air, I just wanted to be up there. I was fascinated by airplanes.”

Because the Air Force was facing a glut of pilots, Henry was assigned as a radar tracking officer after his commissioning. It was three years before he finally entered pilot training.

Assigned after earning his wings to the 427th ARS at Langley AFB, Hampton, Va., Henry soon learned an uncomfortable truth. Although the Air Force had been desegregated – on paper – since 1949, the reality was a different matter.

Although he worked for months to move over to the pilot’s seat, he never was upgraded from his status as a copilot at Langley.

“They were not too anxious to check me out,” Henry recalled. “Then they had to do it because someone in Washington wanted to know why I had so many hours as a copilot and hadn’t been checked out as an aircraft commander.”

Assigned an instructor pilot whom Henry bluntly described as “a racist,” he still could not get upgraded.

“I couldn’t satisfy him with anything,” Henry said.

It took a reassignment to the 421st ARS at Yokota AB, Japan, to make the advancement happen.

“One I got overseas, I checked out right away,” he said.

Recalling that he was one of the very few black pilots in any unit where he was assigned, Henry said everyone treated him cordially, but he just “wasn’t one of the guys.”

“Just because the Air Force was integrated, that didn’t mean everyone had to accept you,” he said. “They tolerated me because they had to. That was it.

“I accepted that,” Henry added. “I was flying, and that’s what I wanted to do. So I figured my chance would come, sooner or later.”

Henry liked piloting the KB-50, calling it “very reliable, to begin with.”

“I never had any worries. I was confident I would go out and that it would bring me back, although maybe not with all four engines working.

“As the years came along, though, [the aircraft] started showing rust and tear. We’d lose with four engines turning and come back with three,” he said. “We’d have oil all over the wings.”

Henry was piloting KB-50s in Vietnam when the order came to ground the aircraft.

“It was a corrosion problem, and I was surprised,” Henry added. “I didn’t think they were that bad. I’d have flown it back.”

After retiring from the Air Force, Henry first worked for the Postal Service then for Medicaid. He retired again in 1994 as an investigator for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

He also has been recognized with the Federal Aviation Administration’s Master Pilot award. The award recognizes 50 or more years of flying in command of an aircraft without an accident or mishap.

Thinking back, Henry admits he enjoyed flying the Superfortress on all of its missions.

“I loved that airplane,” he said. “Had it kept flying, I would have loved to stay with it. I was honored to have the experience of flying such a historic airplane.”

(Continued on Page 16)
Rolland E. ‘Pug’ Hoover

Retired Lt. Col. Rolland E. “Pug” Hoover was assigned to fly the KB-50 after it had been upgraded with two J-47 jet engines. Being at the controls of the big, powerful aircraft was a real thrill for the young lieutenant from Goshen, Ind.

Now 86, Hoover made a name for himself even before the Air Force as a standout athlete at Goshen High School, where he played basketball, football and ran track. Later, at Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Ind., he majored in physical education and was in the Air Force ROTC program. He graduated in 1958.

His first assignment out of pilot training was in the cockpit of a KB-50J.

During his six years on the Superfortress’s flight deck, Hoover flew for four different air refueling squadrons.

Hoover spent much of his early career flying training missions in the KB-50, also taking on real-world refueling flights. It was an exciting assignment, sometimes full of surprises.

“We seldom had a typical day flying tankers,” he said. “For example, we were on temporary duty in Bermuda and not scheduled to fly, but we learned there was a formation of fighters coming in from Europe.”

Because the crosswinds were so high, the fighters had to continue to the United States but needed to refuel. Otherwise, they’d run out of gas, Hoover said.

“The refueling went well, but now the crosswinds were over our recommended landing limits,” he recalled. One of the KB-50s made it down safely, while another was blown off the runway.

“I was [in the third aircraft] and got down on the first attempt, but I was all over the runway. My flight engineer said he saw the centerline of the runway three times out his side window.

“We had reversed the opposite side engine so often my left arm was cramped.”

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Hoover and other KB-50 crews supported President John F. Kennedy’s embargo of the island.

“We orbited about 100 miles off Cuba to refuel reconnaissance aircraft and their escorts. We were on alert all the time.”

But sometimes the usually reliable KB-50 was not as dependable as he and its crew would have preferred.

“On my solo flight as an aircraft commander, we lost three engines while returning from Bermuda,” he said. “We landed on the two jets and with one recip running.”

Hoover had compiled more than 2,000 hours in the KB-50 by the time the airframe was retired.

In 1965 found himself running a one-man shop in Arizona.

As the sole member of the Tactical Air Command’s Det. 8, 4440th Aircraft Delivery Group at Davis-Monthan AFB, Tucson Ariz., Hoover coordinated aircrews on aircraft ferry missions into and out of the Military Aircraft Storage and Disposition Center, aka “The Boneyard.”

He later served in Guam, Virginia, the Philippines, Korea, and Idaho, flying everything from the C-47 to C-97s. Later in his career, Hoover served as commander of the Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, security police squadron.

After retiring from the Air Force in 1978, Hoover trained as a motorcycle mechanic, worked as a service manager for a local Honda dealership, and started his own golf cart business.

He also raced cars and motorcycles, and in 1987 decided to build his own racecar. His wife, Norma, agreed, but with the caveat she’d be the one behind the wheel.

Norma Hoover then made a name for herself on local tracks, with her husband proudly watching.

Hoover has been a Lifetime member of the TAC Tanker Association since March 2011.

Today, he and Norma live quietly in Grants Pass, Ore.

Kenneth S. ‘Otto’ Kruger

The United States military lost a sailor but gained an airman in September 1958 following Ken Kruger’s chance encounter with an Air Force non-commissioned officer in California.

“I was going to join the Navy but met and was talked into joining the Air Force by a staff sergeant from Hamilton Air Force Base,” Kruger said. He was 18 years old.

Kruger served eight years in uniform, all of it while flying the KB-50 or the C-130E.

“My first choice was as an in-flight refueling specialist, and I transferred to an aircraft loadmaster when the KB-50s were retired,” he said.

Kruger pauses for a photo during his assignment with the 622nd Air Refueling Squadron at England AFB, La. He was the subject of a story in the local paper after taking his reenlistment oath while in flight.

Kruger’s first assignment after technical training was with the 622nd Air Refueling Squadron at England AFB, Alexandria, La.

He checked into a squadron whose members were in shock after having lost a KB-50 and its six-man crew that morning. Kruger was taken to the barracks and told to stay put; he wasn’t processed in until five days later. Parts of the first flying gear he received were stenciled with the names of some of the dead crew.

His days were reasonably typical, Kruger said, either flying or training – but not always. One mission saw the KB-50, flying only on its three reciprocating engines, refuel a trio of F-100 during an airshow. The pilot made a high speed, low pass over the crowd, then banked at a 50-degree angle, causing the assembled crowd to run for cover.

“Today, no pilot could get away with doing a thing like that, but those were the good old days,” Kruger said.

One night, a fellow reel operator bragged he’d parachute out of the aircraft the following day. Bets were taken on the young airman’s boast, Kruger said. Sure enough, as the plane was on final approach, the man jumped. He made it safely to the ground and for some reason was never punished.

Kruger enjoyed Air Force life so much that after four years of service, he planned a memorable reenlistment. On the appointed day in September 1962, he took the oath of enlistment aboard his KB-50 aircraft, flying 19,000 feet above western Texas. A local newspaper carried both the story and a photo of the high-flying ceremony.

The Cuban Missile Crisis only a month later interrupted his reenlistment leave plans.

The Tactical Air Command, of which the 622nd was a part, was deploying its fighters, reconnaissance aircraft, and tankers to MacDill Air Force Base as part of the effort to enforce the American embargo of the island nation, and Kruger was ordered to go along.
“I was called back from my leave, and we took a KB-50 to MacDill AFB, and was turned back to England AFB with another aircraft and sat it out there,” he said.

The world was on tenterhooks for several days, although Kruger wasn’t concerned about a conflict with the Soviet Union.

“I never gave a thought to nuclear war,” he said. “When the squadron returned, we went back to normal training flights.”

After the KB-50 fleet was grounded permanently, Kruger flew the C-130E at Dyess AFB, Abilene, Texas; he then was ordered to the 345th Troop Carrier Squadron at Ching Chuan Kang AB, Taiwan — or so he thought.

“My records went to CCK, but I went to Nha Trang, Vietnam,” he said. Ultimately, however, Kruger was awarded the Air Medal for his achievements during his tour in Southeast Asia.

However, as much as he enjoyed flying, the constant travel and uncertainty led Kruger, then an airman first class (E-4), to end his military career.

“I got very tired of being TDY away from my wife for so many long stretches at a time,” he said. “The decision to leave the Air Force was made when I returned from a three-month TDY in Okinawa and was called the day I returned and told I was going TDY to Kentucky.

“I told my wife that day I would be getting out of the Air Force.”

Now 81 years old and living in Reno, Nev., Kruger looks back on his Air Force days with fondness.

“I loved the KB-50 and would be doing that same job today if it were possible.”

Harvey ‘Harv’ Margulies

Harvey “Harv” Margulies isn’t the least bit shy about expressing his feelings about his years spent in the KB-50.

“I loved every minute,” he said.

Rated as a master navigator, Margulies, 86, didn’t start out as an Air Force officer. Instead, he took the long way into an aircraft cockpit, starting his career in 1954 as an enlisted aircraft radio mechanic.

“I was 18 and had gotten tired of college, and I’d run out of money,” he said of his reason for enlisting. “I applied for the Aviation Cadet program after a year as a radio mechanic.”

After receiving his commission and completing navigator training, Margulies was transferred to Sewart Air Force Base, Smyrna, Tenn., where he flew on the C-123 Provider out of the 345th Troop Carrier Squadron. From there, he transferred to the KB-50 with the 429th ARS at Langley AFB, Hampton, Va.

Moving from the cramped C-123 to the more spacious KB-50J was a dream come true for the young navigator.

“My seat in the C-123 was a seat belt hooked together and then hooked to paratrooper anchor cables,” while flying the Provider, he said.

“My feet were in the cockpit, but my rear end was hanging over the cargo compartment.

“In the KB-50, I had a desk and a seat, LORAN (a long-range radio navigation system), radar, and a sextant. I was a kid with new toys.”

As a crew member aboard the KB-50J – the aircraft already had been modified with the installation of two J-47 jet engines – Margulies was in the air about twice a week.

Aircraft commander Capt. Jack Hardee and copilot Lt. T.O. Williams, with Margulies in the background, greet two executives at the Hayes aircraft plant in Birmingham, Ala. Their aircraft, Tail No. 51-460, had been built as an unarmed TB-50H trainer, but was upgraded to a KB-50K with the addition of two General Electric J-47 jet engines.

“We’d be refueling fighters, primarily off the East Coast to give them proficiency in refueling for over-water deployments,” he recalled. “When not flying, we were on an alert called RUN FAST, where we had 15 minutes to man the aircraft.

“We’d preflight early in the morning that day and stay on alert all day.”

Margulies’ alert practice time was put to good use in October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Air Force deployed two fighter wings and 20 KB-50Js to McCoy AFB, Orlando, Fla.; Margulies and his crew had been on a standard 21-day deployment to the Azores and arrived a day after the rest of the unit.

“We were told to go home, wash our clothes and come back in the morning,” Margulies recalled. McCoy, which closed in 1975, was home to Strategic Air Command B-52 and KC-135 aircraft, all of which were sent to other bases to make room for the fighters and tankers.

“We sat in our planes from 0730 until 1700, except for one hour for lunch,” Margulies said. “We were worried about nuclear war since our distance to Cuba was about 200 to 250 miles.”

Although the standoff with the Soviet Union over its placing intercontinental missiles on Cuban soil lasted only 13 days beginning in mid-October, the deployed fighters and bombers remained at McCoy until the end of November 1962. Margulies’ crew went to MacDill AFB, Tampa, Fla., until just before Christmas.

Like many other KB-50J flyers, Margulies was mystified following several reports of KB-50 crashes, several of which were blamed on engine troubles.

“The problems later were traced to corrosion, metal fatigue and the flap motors in the bomb bays, where our fuel bladders were located,” he said.

“Misfortune ran high until they discovered why we had lost so many aircraft,” he said. “We all lost many friends.”

Margulies’ crew flew the next-to-last KB-50J out of Langley, headed for The Boneyard at Davis-Monthan AFB, Tucson, Ariz. (Continued on Page 18)
The unit’s final aircraft, then deployed to Saudi Arabia, didn’t arrive back in the United States, until two months later.

By this time, Margulies had been promoted to captain, and was transferred back to Sewart AFB, where he was assigned to the 18th Troop Carrier Squadron, flying the C-130A.

Margulies completed his Air Force career as a major, retiring in 1974 with 20 years on active duty. He then had a 23-year career in the US Navy long before taking to the skies as an Air Force airman.

Mathews, 95, is a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, a rarity among the TAC Tanker Association members. Mathews served in the Navy from January 1944 to October 1947. During that time, he was assigned for three months to the USS Currituck, a seaplane tender. Just returned from occupation duty in Japan and the Philippines, it patrolled along the Pacific Coast while he was aboard.

Returning to his hometown of Liberty, Pa., after his discharge, it wasn’t long until Mathews, then 23, decided to again put on the uniform, this time that of the US Air Force.

“I’d spent more than three years in the Navy, and I missed the military,” he said.

Mathew’s naval service as an aviation technician served him well in the Air Force when he was assigned as an aircraft maintenance specialist at Hamilton Air Force Base, Novato, Calif.

In early 1953 he was sent to flight engineer school, then received orders to Alexandria AFB (later England AFB), Alexandria, La. Afterward he was sent overseas to RAF Sculthorpe, UK, where he was assigned to the 420th ARS as a flight engineer aboard the KB-29, the predecessor to the KB-50.

With the arrival of the KB-50J in February 1958, Mathews switched over to the Superfortress.

“I liked the KB-50J; it gave us much greater speed while we were refueling,” he said.

Mathews doesn’t have any unique stories about his time aboard the KB-50J, saying most of his work was routine.

“We’d get up, go to Ops to see what was going on and what they had for me to do,” he recalled.

“The KB-50J was just a very good airplane,” he added.

Following his assignment to Sculthorpe, Mathews was sent to Dover AFB, Del., where he flew the C-124 Globemaster and later served as an instructor at Tinker AFB, Oklahoma City, Okla.

He retired as a master sergeant on Aug. 1, 1965, from Tinker AFB and now lives in Lake Charles, La.

“My wife wanted to go home, so I had to retire and leave the best job I ever had in the military,” he said.

Gary L. Myers

Retired Chief Master Sgt. Gary L. Myers has been treasurer of the TAC Tanker Association since June 2010. For the boom operator who retrained into the manpower management career field, crunching numbers seems a natural fit for the organization.

The Hellam, Pa., native said it was because he needed a job that he enlisted into the Air Force in July 1954, only a few weeks after his 17th birthday.

Initially trained as a KB-29 refueling operator, he later moved up to its successor, the KB-50, serving in the 420th ARS at RAF Sculthorpe, United Kingdom, and the 431st ARS at Biggs AFB, Texas.

But the grounding of the entire KB-50 fleet in 1965 following two crashes in Southeast Asia essentially cost Myers his job.

He soon was behind a desk instead of a refueling reel and hose. Despite the retraining, Myers looks favorably upon his time as a reel operator and doesn’t consider his serving aboard either aircraft as having been particularly stressful.

“We flew once a week and played a lot of cards,” he said. He stood daytime ramp alert during much of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

He admits to a soft spot for the KB-50 airframe.

The J model, equipped with the J-47 jet engines, was a significant improvement over the four-engine model he’d been flying, Myers said.

“It had a lot more power than the D model,” he said. “The J model was a good airplane, lots of power.”

After retraining into the manpower career field, Myers was stationed at several bases in the United States and overseas, including RAF Upper Heyford, U.K. He followed that assignment with a tour at the Defense Investigative Service, for which he was awarded the Department of Defense Joint Service Commendation Medal and a position with the Tactical Air Command’s 4400th Management Engineering Squadron.

After retiring in 1980 with 26 years of service, Myers worked for the US Civil Service until 1999, and then as a volunteer at the Langley AFB dental clinic through 2016.


Michael J. O’Leary

Mike O’Leary calls his four years in the military an unforgettable part of his life, but also an example of what could have been.

Born in Los Angeles, Calif. and raised mostly in San Diego, O’Leary grew up with a love of airplanes.

“I had books, magazines, and catalogs, and my cousin and I used to quiz each other about airplanes,” he said. “I grew up wanting to make a career out of the Air Force and become an officer.

“Right after high school, my parents accompanied me to the recruiter, but I wasn’t 18 yet, so they had to sign for me. But I knew I wanted to fly.”
O’Leary got his chance when the Air Force sent him for technical training at Sheppard Air Force Base, Wichita Falls, Texas. “We had a meeting, and they asked if anyone wanted to fly. You had to volunteer,” he said. “Of the 40 of us, five put their hands up; the rest went into maintenance. I ended up in tech school for in-flight refueling.”

After completing training, O’Leary reported to the 427th Air Refueling Squadron at Langley AFB, Hampton, Va. “I was immediately checked out and put on a flight crew,” he said.

On a return flight from the Azores, the aircraft commander asked O’Leary if he wanted to take a turn in the left seat. “The first airplane I ever sat in the pilot’s seat was a KB-50,” O’Leary said.

“The copilot was there, and after we reached altitude, I was invited to come up and fly it,” he said. “I found there was a little slack in the control column; if you moved it, there wasn’t an immediate response. The airplane was older, so it had a little play. “It was like a roller coaster for a while until I got the feel of the slack. It was an experience I’ll never forget.”

O’Leary had been at Langley for a little over a year when the squadron lost KB-50 Tail No. 51-0465. The aircraft, with nine aboard, was on its way to Lajes Field, Azores, when it disappeared about 240 miles off the East Coast.

One of the refueling operators was a friend and fellow Californian, Airman 2nd Class Paul M. Clawson. “We had gone to survival school together and were looking forward to getting together in the Azores,” O’Leary said. “I knew everyone on that airplane.”

O’Leary’s crew launched almost immediately to look for the missing aircraft, with the Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard eventually covering 440,000 square miles in the search. “I think we spent over 14 hours out there; it was my longest flight ever,” he said. “But they were just gone. We’ve always wondered what happened.”

In October 1962, O’Leary was TDY in the Azores when the Cuban Missile Crisis began. “We were put on alert, and we flew a lot. The Navy was doing the blockade [of Cuba], but we had a lot of planes in the air. We didn’t have cell phones or TV to keep up on the news, and we only heard what they told us. And being enlisted, we were not in the loop.”

“We kind of knew in general what was going on, but it wasn’t until later we found out how serious things really were.”

Although O’Leary had gotten proficient enough to be assigned as a reel operator instructor, he was not making any upward mobility. After more than two years in the Air Force, he had not been promoted past airman second class (E-3). When the air refueling squadrons were shut down, he transferred to the C-130 Hercules as a loadmaster. Still, the promotion did not materialize.

He also missed his chance at a commission when the Air Force changed the criteria for becoming a pilot. Having passed the necessary examinations, he qualified for officer’s training. However, he did not qualify for pilot or navigator training because he lacked the required two years of college.

With the end of his enlistment approaching, O’Leary had a choice to make. He decided to leave. “They offered me reenlistment as a loadmaster, but they would not commit to giving me [airman first class],” he said. “I talked to my wife about it, and my father-in-law, who was retired Air Force, and I decided it was probably time to move on.”

O’Leary went on to college and a career as a certified public accountant. He also took flying lessons and earned his private pilot’s license. He since has had the opportunity to fly on World War II aircraft, including a B-17G, with the Commemorative Air Force, a private group that maintains and flies historic airplanes.

Now 78 years old, O’Leary lives in Washington, Utah, with Barbara, his wife of almost 58 years. He is a lifetime member of the TAC Tanker Association.

Despite some disappointments, O’Leary has very fond memories of his time as a refueling operator. “There are no sour grapes here,” he said. “To me, at that time, I thought the KB-50 was the greatest thing going, and I really enjoyed my time as a refueling operator. I look at the airplane now on the Internet, and it looks pretty small compared to many others. “But to me, it was pretty big.”

Guido J. ‘Gus’ Rinaldi

Guido “Gus” Rinaldi considers his eight years in the Air Force “among the best years of my life.”

Rinaldi, 85, served from 1958 to 1966, most of that time in the cockpit of a KB-50J.

A first-generation American, Rinaldi’s father had immigrated from Italy. He was born in the Bronx, but grew up in Peekskill, N.Y., about 45 miles to the north.

Like many flyers, Rinaldi’s infatuation with airplanes began at a very young age.

(Continued on Page 20)
“When I was about four years old, I saw a P-40 fly over, and I fell in love,” he said. “I decided that was for me. When I was in high school, I worked six days a week and used the money for flying lessons. After that, I was determined to become an Air Force pilot.”

Rinaldi’s father worked as a railroad conductor, and Rinaldi followed in his footsteps during summers while attending Lehigh University, earning money as a brakeman and conductor with the New York Central Railroad.

He got his first taste of military life while a member of Lehigh’s Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps.

In January 1960, Rinaldi completed training with the 3561st Pilot Training Squadron at Webb AFB, Big Spring, Texas, and in March reported to the 429th Air Refueling Squadron at Langley AFB, Hampton, Va.

“The 429th was a great squadron,” he recalled. “I spent almost three years there as a copilot and in November 1962 got checked out as an aircraft commander.

“I must have been about 25 years old, and looking back on it now, I had been given a lot of responsibility for a young man. But then I didn’t really think about it.”

While at Langley, missions included refueling flights over the Atlantic Ocean and deployments to Bermuda or the Azores.

“That was pretty rough duty,” Rinaldi said with a laugh. “I don’t know if I should feel guilty about it. In Bermuda, I could rent a motorbike for about $29 for three weeks and spend off duty time riding around the island.”

In late 1962, Rinaldi was aware of the growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union when President John F. Kennedy called for an embargo of Communist-run Cuba.

“I remember it distinctly,” he said. “We were at Hampton, and I was out mowing the grass when my wife came out and said, ‘Go grab your bags, you’ve got to get out to the base.’”

Rinaldi’s crew deployed to McCoy AFB, Orlando, Fla., where they spent days on alert and some nights sleeping under the wings of their KB-50J. The thought of nuclear war was a significant concern; they’d wake up each morning not knowing if the day’s sunrise would be their last, Rinaldi said.

One day, an alert sent the men scrambling into their aircraft.

“The wing commander was in the lead plane, and we blasted off toward Cuba,” he said. “I was in the right seat thinking, ‘We’re going to war.’

“Fortunately, somewhere south of Key West, they called us back.”

Some time afterward, Rinaldi and his family departed for the 420th ARS at RAF Sculthorpe, U.K. Assigned his own crew, Rinaldi’s work included refueling missions over much of the European continent.

Each time he’d launch on a mission, Rinaldi knew he was flying an old aircraft, one that had been repurposed as a tanker after initially serving as a bomber. The planes had problems.

“Looking back, those KB-50s could be pretty dangerous airplanes,” he said. “It was a complex machine, flying with four turbocharged reciprocating [R-4360] engines and two jet engines.

“A lot of things could go wrong with those 4360s. The good thing is that if one of them went out, we still had five engines. I think that in four years of flying the KB-50, we must have lost 43 engines.

“Many years later, a classmate of mine confided in me that he was very concerned every time he got into a KB-50. When I went in to the KB-50, I was 24 years old, and I, too, was very concerned.”

The Air Force lost its share of KB-50s during the aircraft’s service life. Rinaldi thinks he might have been one of the last people to see a plane that went down in January 1962.

“We were taking off from Langley, and I was right behind them,” he said. “He took off. As usual, we had an engine problem, so we taxied back to fix it. That plane disappeared and was never heard from again.

“We flew from Langley to the Azores looking for debris, and to this day, nobody knows what happened. I watched them take off, and then they disappeared forever.”

While at Sculthorpe, Rinaldi learned civilian airlines were suffering from a significant shortage of pilots.

“A lot of my friends were getting out and getting hired with the airlines,” he said. “I went and took all the tests and the physicals, and they offered me a job.”

Rinaldi retired after spending almost three decades flying for Delta Airlines. He and his wife, Ann, now live at The Villages in Florida.

Robert Schleihs

Robert Schleihs’s relatively short military career was dedicated entirely to the KB-50.

Schleihs grew up in the Wisconsin lumber city of Marinette and joined the military in 1962.

“I’d been doing a lot of odd jobs, mostly in pipeline construction, digging ditches,” he said. “All of the guys around town who were my age were just waiting be be drafted, so five of us decided to go sign up for the Air Force instead.

“We figured maybe we’d stay together, but after Lackland, we all went our ways and I didn’t see most of them until after we all got out.”

The young airman was delighted when he was assigned training in his first career field choice, inflight refueling.

As an airman second class, Schleihs was part of a November 1963 — February 1964 mission to Saudi Arabia — note the camel painted on their aircraft's nose. The crew was Capt. Richard Elliott, Lt. Bobby Phillips, Lt. Robert Brezinski, TSgt. James Williams, Schleihs, and A1C Bernard Thaler.
For the young Wisconsinite, his trip to Lackland had been the first time he’d ever flown — and he loved the experience. He couldn’t turn down the offer to fly for the Air Force.

“I guess I was one of the lucky ones, and it was a very good choice,” Schleihs said.

While in tech school at Sheppard Air Force Base, Wichita Falls, Texas, Schleihs became a “green rope,” or a student leader, a job that served him well later in life.

“It came with a lot of responsibility,” he said. “I had to supervise people and that was a good experience for being just 23 years old.”

After tech school, Schleihs was transferred to another Texas base, Biggs AFB in El Paso. He quickly became accustomed to the routine of the 431st Air Refueling Squadron.

“We flew a lot, and we trained a lot,” Schleihs recalled. “It was that and hanging out with all the other real operators.”

The difference between the chilly climate of Wisconsin and the deserts of West Texas was not lost on the young airman.

“When we first got there, we lived in old, open bay World War II barracks,” he said. “The worst thing was the sand always blowing into the barracks. You’d come back from a TDY and your whole bed would be covered in sand. Those buildings leaked that bad.”

“Otherwise, it was just hot,” he said.

What Schleihs enjoyed the most, however, was flying to places such as Hawaii, Bermuda and the Azores.

“Before I was assigned to a crew, if some of the married guys didn’t want to go, I’d volunteer and be gone for two or three weeks. Other than that we really had very little to do, we’d train and go fly. Once we were on a crew, it was ‘TDY, here we come!’”

The difficulty of his job often depended on two factors: the weather and the flying skills of the pilots in the fighter aircraft the KB-50s were refueling.

In theory it sounds simple: the refueling operators would unreel three hoses, one from each wing and one from the aircraft’s tail. Each hose had a basket-like drogue on the end. The pilot would fly up to the tanker, hook a probe on the outside of his aircraft into the drogue, and the fuel would start to flow.

“On a nice sunny day with a blue sky, you could see them coming, you could talk with the [pilot],” Schleihs said. “We’d put the hose out 70 feet if he was good at it, he could stick the probe right into the drogue.”

The fighter’s pilot then would slide forward several feet until he was just under the tanker’s wingtip or tail. As the fighter took on fuel, it would become heavier and the pilot would have to back off. Sometimes the KB-50’s pilot would put the aircraft into a slight dive to prevent the receiver aircraft from stalling.

“Flying at night, it was always a little more difficult,” Schleihs said. “If you had storms and lightning and wind blowing, it was more challenging. In bad weather, the hose would float up and down, like it was waving at them.”

“We’d just have to sit and watch,” he added. “We had no control over it.”

Schleihs flew orientation missions over the western United States for student pilots.

“Some of the new guys, they had a heck of a time trying to hook up,” he said. “But they had to learn it. We were over land. But when we’d go out to Lajes or Bermuda, we were taking on the boys who were going to and from Europe. They were out 500 miles over the ocean. They’d have had to learn how to gas up or go back.”

“Or they’d go down,” Schleihs added.

Most missions were relatively routine except for one that stands out in Schleihs’ memory.

“We had a fire in the No. 4 engine,” he said. “We never wore our parachutes in the back where we were, but we had them just in case. When the pilot said ‘Prepare to bail,’ we put them on.

“We had just taken off and still were pretty low and there was a lot of swamp below us. Fortunately the engineer got the fire out, so we turned around and landed.”

Despite the structural problems and corrosion that eventually grounded the KB-50J fleet, Schleihs considered the Superfortress a very reliable aircraft.

“We hated to see those aircraft go to the Boneyard,” he added.

In March 1965, when the 431st was shut down and its last KB-50J sent to the Air Force Museum, Schleihs was reassigned to Stewart AFB, Smyrna, Tenn., for training as a loadmaster.

But that job did not materialize.

When his father, Howard, died in December 1965, Schleihs, then an airman second class, was granted an early discharge. He went home to Wisconsin and, eventually, a career at Scott Paper Company and Kimberly Clark.

He retired in 2005 after 37 years with the company.

Now 81 years old, Schleihs and his wife, Jan, still live in Marquette. He has been a member of the TAC Tanker Association since 2006 and has attended every reunion since, including the 2021 finale in Delaware.

David W. ‘Scotty’ Scott

Back in 1959, Dave “Scotty” Scott didn’t intend to make a career out of the Air Force. It just happened.

“I liked airplanes growing up, and I was involved with model airplanes and other things,” he said. That interest led to a stint in the Reserve Officer Training Corps while attending Michigan State University, Scott said.

“At our freshman orientation, some guy in uniform was saying that in the Army, you get to shoot guns and ride tanks. The Air Force guys said, ‘We fly airplanes,’ and I decided that was for me,” he said.

“During my senior year, I learned that if you wanted to be a pilot, you had to sign up for five years instead of just the normal three,” Scott said. “I figured, what’s the difference, three years or five years, it doesn’t matter. So, I signed up for five.”

When those five years had passed, Scott had the chance to switch over to civilian flying. He’d even interviewed for an airline job, but ultimately those recruiters had wasted their time.

“I figured I was having a good time, and I said I’d stick with the Air Force,” he said.

Following pilot training, Scott was assigned to the 431st Air Refueling Squadron at Biggs Air Force Base, El Paso, Texas. He knew he’d be flying the KB-50J, an aircraft with four reciprocating engines and two J-47 jet engines.

“The guys who were aircraft commanders at the time had flown the B-29 and the B-50, which didn’t have the jet engines,” he said. “They were more concerned about the [R-4360 reciprocating] engines than the jets.”

“I can’t testify that this is true, but many of them said the reciproc on the B-50 only were good for about 500 hours. It wasn’t uncommon to see that aircraft coming back with less than four engines turning.”

From Texas, Scott spent much of his time flying over the rest of the American southwest, the Pacific Ocean, and Hawaii. These real-world missions, coupled with the constant training, meant a hectic existence.

“Our squadron motto was, ‘Anywhere, anytime,’” Scott said. “For us, it was, ‘Somewhere, all the time.’”

Scott’s KB-50J would meet up with some of the Air Force’s newest and most advanced weapons systems. Many of these were aircraft in what was known as the Century Series, including the F-101 Voodoo, F-104 Starfighter and F-105 Thunderchief.

Even with its jet engines, though, the aging KB-50J still was slow enough the fighters were in danger of stalling as they refueled, so on training missions, they rarely took on a full load of fuel.
Scott couldn’t help but admire the formation flying skills exhibited by the fighter pilots. Many would fly right up alongside the tanker – only about 50 feet away from the fuselage – to snag a moving fuel line trailing in the plane’s airstream.

From the KB-50’s cockpit, it looked almost effortless.

“They’d push up and be right on the wing,” he said, “I wouldn’t want to do that. Those guys were really good.”

But life as on a tanker wasn’t for everyone, as one unfortunate fighter pilot learned during an impromptu trip with Scott’s crew.

“We were on Wake Island, and some F-101s were going over when one of them had a problem and had to land. They redlined him, so he wasn’t going anywhere.

“The next day, he asked if he could ride with us and go back and watch a refueling.”

The only way to get to the refueling position in the aircraft’s rear compartment was to crawl through a narrow, 33-foot tunnel that stretched between it and the cockpit. The trip took the flyer over the former bomb bays, a space that now held fuel tanks.

Even seasoned B-50 and KB-50 crew members sometimes found a journey through the confined area to be a bit disconcerting.

The unfortunate fighter pilot must have suffered from a severe bout of claustrophobia or motion sickness – or both.

“He had to go through that tunnel,” Scott said. “He was going from the back to the front and climbed out of there, white as a ghost.

“He said, ‘I’m never flying in one of these things again!’”

Scott retired as a colonel in 1986, then worked in executive positions in various businesses.

Now 84 years old, he lives in Albuquerque, New Mex. Scott has fond memories of flying the KB-50J a half-century ago.

“I enjoyed it,” he said. “I wasn’t married at the time, and I did a lot of temporary duty. It was a good mission, a good airplane, and we did a lot of good things.”

He’s also more than pleased to see one of the two surviving KB-50J models at the Air Mobility Command Museum at Dover AFB.

“The wing commander at MacDill kept saying [Dover] couldn’t have it, and it just rusted out and corroded away. Fortunately, someone had enough sense to send it to Dover.

“It’s nice to see it there and being restored where we know it will be in good shape.”

William F. “Bill” Wolford

Bill Wolford believes he holds the distinction of once being the youngest master sergeant in the Air Force.

He was 19.

“I’ve had a really interesting career,” he said matter-of-factly.

The Detroit, Mich., native joined the military in February 1953 after a neighborhood recruiter urged him to consider enlisting into the Air Force’s air cadet program.

“I was 18 years old, the Korean War was on, and I didn’t have any money to go to college,” Wolford explained.

He had completed his cadet training as a navigator/bombardier and earned a commission as a second lieutenant when he received an unexpected appointment to the fledgling Air Force Academy. But the appointment didn’t work out and under the laws at the time he reverted to enlisted status.

“People were telling me I had more time standing in the pay line than I had in the Air Force,” he said.

Wolford eventually passed his flying physical and earned a pilot’s commission. He was assigned to the 429th Air Refueling Squadron at Langley Air Force Base, Hampton, Va.

His first encounter with a KB-50 was memorable.

“I walked out and saw that huge aircraft,” he said. “It was the biggest airplane I’d ever seen up close.”

But Wolford didn’t have much time to settle in. Almost as soon as he arrived at Langley, the squadron was deployed to Goose Bay, Labrador. He quickly was administered all the necessary immunizations, issued his flight gear, and packed into the right seat of his aircraft.

“The pilot told me not to touch anything,” he said. “And off we went to Goose Bay. Three weeks later, I came back as a checked-out copilot.”

As a “young, dumb lieutenant,” Wolford was assigned extra duty as the 429th’s supply officer. It was there he learned the value of having a good noncommissioned officer at his back.

“I did an inventory after signing all the papers and found we were short all kinds of stuff. But I had a fantastic supply sergeant. He said, ‘Give me a case of whiskey, and I’ll take care of it.’ And within two weeks, I had a complete inventory.”

“I always trusted my NCOS.”

After four years at Langley, Wolford and his family were transferred to the 421st ARS at Yokota Air Base, Japan. The squadron kept up a demanding pace of operations.

“There was always some training going on, so we were constantly busy,” he said. “We’d go on alert for two weeks, then go TDY for two weeks and have two weeks off, but that was mostly for local flying and catching up on appointments and other training.

“Then we’d start the cycle again.”

Wolford flew the KB-50 before and after it was fitted with two J47 jet engines.

“The jets made a huge difference,” he said. Flying a fully loaded KB-50 out of California before the J47s had been installed, his aircraft once barely made it into the air.

“We staggered out over the desert, and I think we took two boards off the top of the runway fence,” he said.

Refueling the much faster fighter aircraft of the day also was more manageable with two additional jet engines. As they took on fuel, the fighters would get heavier, and their speed would decrease almost to the point where they were in danger of stalling. Without the J47s, the KB-50 had to “toboggan” or go into a slow descent that allowed the fighters to keep up their airspeed.

Although the KB-50s had been in service for years, Wolford says he wasn’t too concerned about their age.

“We were all young and excited about flying, so I never really thought all that much about any problems,” he said. “Usually out of a formation of five, someone would have an emergency, like a fuel leak or a refueling hose being stuck out.

“I thought they were good old airplanes. They were built so strongly we could lose one side of the aircraft because of the cables and still be able to fly.

“But I will say I’d never want to fly an airplane with only a single engine,” he said, “I made too many landings with one engine out. It always was good to have more than one.”

Leaving Yokota in 1963, Wolford transferred to the C-130 and later the C-141. He ended his career in 1973, retiring as a lieutenant colonel. He later lived in Israel for 15 years, working as an administrator for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

Wolford, 87, has been chairman of the board of the TAC Tankers Association since May 2006. He and Shirley, his wife of 65 years, live in Burlington, Vt.
The final flight of Sheba Eight-Zero

Two died, six survived October 1963 KB-50 crash

By its very nature, flying is a dangerous vocation.

And, while taking to the air in a military aircraft is probably safer than in any civilian plane, many men and women of the armed forces have lost their lives to human error, mechanical failures, or completely unknown reasons.

One such incident took place Oct. 20, 1963, in the waters off Bermuda, with the crash of KB-50J tail no. 48-0117. Six men survived, but two lost their lives.


In the rear of the aircraft, separated by two former bomb bays that now carried tanks of jet fuel, was refueling operator Tech. Sgt. Edgar M. Corbin, assistant crew chief Airman 2nd Class Edward Strong, and refueling operator Airman 2nd Class William I. Webster.

Initial news reports said the aircraft crashed into the Atlantic Ocean west of Bermuda after leaving Kindley AFB. The crew was en-route back to England AFB following temporary duty in the Azores, where they had refueled fighter aircraft engaged in trans-Atlantic ferry flights.

Local fishermen augmented an intense search by the Air Force, Coast Guard, and Navy; six of the eight men were found in lifeboats and taken to Kindley by helicopter for medical examination. Only Corbin suffered a severe injury, having broken his leg while parachuting from the stricken aircraft.

Moore’s remains were found the day after the crash in what was left of the cockpit. Unfortunately, Crigler’s body has never been recovered.

The ill-fated aircraft had come to rest on a reef about 35 feet under the ocean surface; news reports said Air Force officials had asked the Navy for help in salvaging the debris to establish the cause of the crash.

An unsuccessful search

To Tilton, however, the reason his aircraft went down is no mystery.

“I can give you the cause since I was the copilot and, of course, centrally involved in the investigation,” Tilton said in an interview years later.

“You can summarize this in two or three words, but the cause of the explosion was a fuel fire involving at least half of the left wing.”

While on a mission the day before the crash, Tilton said Moore had been forced to shut down and restart one of the two jet engines because it had been going into a compressor stall.

“We had been on a mission for about three weeks, and part of that time was on a search mission that got us pretty close to the water,” he said.

Their objective was to find any sign of a C-133 Cargomaster from Dover AFB, Del., that had gone missing the previous month. No trace of that aircraft has ever been found.

Tilton estimated his aircraft had occasionally flown only 200 to 300 feet above the whitecaps during the search mission, permitting spray from the ocean water to be ingested into the General Electric J-47 jet engines.

A post-flight inspection revealed that some rust had appeared on the engine compressor, although it was considered a minor issue that could be cleaned up once the aircraft was back in Louisiana.

“I thought nothing more about it until the investigation,” Tilton said. He added that during the post-crash inquiry, a technical expert from General Electric testified that rust could cause a so-called “cold” compressor stall, damaging the turbine which failed the next day, causing the wing fire.

Disaster on a sunny day

In separate interviews years later, Tilton, Corbin, and Webster gave harrowing details about what happened that Sunday morning.

Following a delay to repair one of their aircraft’s R-4360 reciprocating engines, Sheba Eight-Zero’s crew lifted off at about 10:21 a.m., climbing into a clear and sunny sky.

The first sign of trouble was an unusual noise the crew in the rear compartment noticed immediately, Tilton said.

“We were climbing out through 8,000 feet when the turbine wheel came apart on the left jet,” Tilton said. “That turbine wheel has a red ring along the engine and lined up with the flap well, which had five pressurized fuel lines.”

One of the men in the rear compartment first spotted the fuel-fed fire.

“That was me,” Webster offered. “I was in the left and was getting ready to get up for a cup of coffee or something when I happened to look out and see the jet disintegrate. It just disintegrated. I can see it to this day, that cone coming off and then the fire.”

Webster promptly told Corbin.

“I said, ‘Hey, Ed,’ and then I pointed. ‘He looked over, called the captain and said we have a fire on the left wing.’ ”

“[Webster] just looked up and said the engine was on fire,” Corbin confirmed. “I called the pilot and said, ‘Your left is on fire.’ ”

Moore’s reaction was a calm acknowledgement.

“He said, ‘It sure as hell is,’ and then ordered us to bail out,” Corbin said.

Tilton corroborated Corbin’s call to the cockpit.

“Curley looked out and immediately knew it was not a good situation, to say the least,” Tilton said.

“As soon as he knew about it from the observers in the back, Curley ordered the bailout, saving our lives,” he said. “If we had hesitated, we would have ended up like him.”

(Continued on Page 24)
The crew had been in the air less than ten minutes.
Within seconds, the inner half of the left wing was burning, and flames had reached the two R-4360 reciprocating engines on that side. Their propellers showed engines were still turning, with the burning jet engine just hanging off the end of the wing.

In the back, Corbin heard a voice over the intercom send out an emergency Mayday transmission, then radioed the cockpit to confirm he and the others were jumping.

“I called the Mayday since I had just been talking to Departure Control,” Tilton said. “I think the [investigation] board always thought it was Curley’s voice. But it was mine.”

Tilton feels Moore had been fighting nearly hopeless odds to control the dying aircraft.

Webster hit a valve to depressurize the compartment and open the hatch. But the door, which had been written up for not staying closed during flight, had been temporarily repaired with the wrong type of bolt.

Webster and Corbin struggled to get the hatchajar so they and Strong could jump.
Webster went out first, followed by Strong and then Corbin.

“Ed was the last one out, and the door hit him in the leg,” Webster said. “The only way he got out was to pull his parachute and let it drag him out.”

Corbin fought to get free of the aircraft.

“When I got ready to bail out, there was another explosion, but I didn’t see it,” he said. “It forced me out the door, but when I went out, my right leg got caught.”

Hanging by his foot along the outside of the aircraft, Corbin could see Bermuda about 16 miles in the distance. In those few seconds, he concentrated on surviving, not barely considering what would happen if he couldn’t get free.

“I didn’t think I was going to die there,” he said. “But I knew if I couldn’t get my leg out, I’d be going down with the airplane.”

The inertia of Moore’s attempts to maneuver the KB-50 pushed Corbin up against the fuselage. Another concern was that even if he got loose, he could be impaled on a piece of metal sticking out of the fuselage.

“I was out there for about 90 seconds,” he recalled. “I think we were going about 200 miles per hour. All I could do was pull my chute.”

The intense wind-stream caught Corbin’s deployed parachute, violently yanking him free of the burning aircraft. The shock fractured his leg and snapped three of the nylon cords attached to his harness.

Webster already was floating toward the ocean under his parachute.

“I’ll be honest, I was scared,” he admitted. “Especially when you know you’re sitting on two bomb bays full of jet fuel. You just want to get out of there.”

Hopeless odds

Corbin said Samaripa, who died in 2005, told him afterward that he’d lowered the KB-50’s nosewheel to use as an emergency exit. The navigator, Sellers went out first.

Tilton thinks Crigler could have gone next but is unsure. When he jumped through the nosewheel exit, he was followed by Samaripa.

“I thought I saw two parachutes behind me,” he said. “That would have been Sellers and Crigler, since Samaripa was after me.”

Tilton feels Moore had been fighting nearly hopeless odds to control the dying aircraft.

“Suspended under his parachute and floating down toward the water, however, Tilton saw a horrifying sight as the Superfortress fell apart. “The wing and the fuselage separated, and they fell into the water in two balls of flame. I guess it had flown about another mile after I jumped.”

Ground records showed only three minutes and 45 seconds had elapsed between the Mayday call and Sheba Eight-Zero blowing itself apart.

Like Webster, Tilton also spotted scraps of material floating in the air, reminding him of shredded carbon paper.

Tilton feels Moore had been fighting nearly hopeless odds to control the dying aircraft.

“More than anything, however, Tilton was concerned about his own fate. He had completed water survival training only two months earlier, so emergency procedures were fresh in his mind.

His survival raft inflated and hung about 15 feet below his feet. As soon as he hit the water, he pulled himself inside and cut the parachute loose.
Cigarette in hand, Corbin relaxes on his way back to Kindley AFB after his rescue. “Had [a] bad day,” he wryly noted on the back of this photo. The caption for the picture, which was published in a local newspaper, said, “T Sgt. E.M. Corbin, the only one of six survivors of yesterday’s crash who was injured, rests his broken leg aboard the Navy helicopter that plucked him from the water off Bermuda.”

“The water was warm, about 80 degrees, and the main thing I was worried about was sharks or barracudas.”

“I was scared about that, too,” Webster added. “I had lost my life vest and had never been in the ocean before.”

Tilton had spotted other parachutes as he was coming down and, floating in his life raft, could see land every time he crested a wave.

“The ocean wasn’t rough; it was a beautiful sunny day,” he said.

Tilton spotted a rescue C-54, lit a smoke flare, and was relieved to see the aircraft’s pilots wag the plane’s wings in recognition.

Five of the survivors were picked up almost immediately by Air Force and Navy helicopters. Webster was the last, spending about seven hours in the water before he was rescued.

Newspaper accounts of the effort noted one civilian skipper reportedly recovered some floating wreckage near the crash scene.

“He didn’t do that again’

After a short recovery at Kindley, the crew, except for Corbin, who still was hospitalized, boarded another KB-50, and flew back to England AFB.

“Webster, Corbin, Samaripa, and I had a lot of time to talk while under observation for a week at Kindley,” Tilton said. “Webster wanted me to talk our squadron commander into letting him go home by ship, but the CO wanted us to ‘get back on the horse that threw you.’”

One incident on the trip home did rattle the men’s nerves, Tilton admitted.

“In cruise, the R-4360 engines needed to have a little operating change for a couple of minutes to clear the lead out of the plugs,” he explained. “If you didn’t do that, the engine would clear itself, but there’d be a little rumble.

“On the way home, Samaripa and I were riding up front, and the panel engine neglected the hourly ritual once. As soon as an engine rumbled, Joe and I hollered loudly at the engineer.

“He didn’t do that again,” Tilton said. “It felt to us just like when our wing caught fire.”

Epilogue

After the official inquiry, the crash survivors went their separate ways. Corbin, Tilton, and Webster lost track of each other; the whereabouts of Sellers and Strong are not known.

Tilton, now 82, retired in 1981 as a lieutenant colonel; Corbin, 89, spent more than a year recovering from his injuries and eventually flew again. He retired in December 1974 as a master sergeant.

Webster, 78, voluntarily took himself off flying status and became a ground refueling technician. He left the Air Force with a medical retirement, unrelated to the accident, in 1966.

A veteran of World War II, Moore, 41, was buried in Arlington National Cemetery five days after the crash. He was survived by his wife, Fonda; the couple had no children. Fonda Moore remarried two years after his death and died in 1994.

Portions of the KB-50J today still lie in between 20 and 35 feet of water.

A native of Oklahoma City, Crigler, 28, was declared missing following the crash. Despite an intensive air and sea search lasting several days, no trace of his body was found. He was declared dead nine days later.

Tilton said the investigation board doubted his account about seeing Crigler’s parachute, but he has no explanation as to why they reached that conclusion.

For their part, members of Crigler’s family said they have no reason to think he might not have jumped simply because he was afraid of the water.

Crigler was survived by his wife, Lena, and three daughters, Valerie, Phyllis, and Carolyn, who still live in Oklahoma. Mrs. Crigler remarried and died in 2016.

NOTE: In addition to interviews with three surviving members of the crew of 48-0117, this article includes information presented in Anne Mills’ book, “Sheba 80,” as well as information presented in the TAC Tanker Tales, the official newsletter of the TAC Tanker Association, and contemporary news accounts.

New names added to AMCM’s Commemorative Garden

An additional six memorial bricks were added to the walkway at the Air Mobility Command Museum’s Commemorative Garden in conjunction with Memorial Day 2021.

- CMSgt. Bickle, Dover AFB Visit, 10-13 Feb. 2021
- Janet VanHoork, “Mom,” We Miss You!
- Nick Saborio, AMCM Volunteer, 1,000-plus hours
- USAF TSgt. Byrl W. Campbell, 9th Alft Sq.
- In Memory of Col. Joseph J. Contiguglia, MD, Fierce Warrior & Loyal Friend
- Sgt. Robert G. Blue, Dover AFB, 1965-1968, C-141, Mrs. Robert Blue, Loving Wife

(Because of formatting requirements, the information presented in this listing may not exactly match the inscriptions on the bricks.)
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